Suffering Can Teach Us

Dharma Talk given by Thich Nhat Hanh on August 13, 1996 in Plum Village, France.

Dear friends, today is the 13th of August, 1996, and we are in the Upper Hamlet. We are going to speak English.

The other day after I spoke about the practice of the four mantras. I said that the fourth mantra is more difficult, so I did not talk about it. In fact it is difficult, but not so difficult. After the Dharma talk, when we were about to do walking meditation, there was a gentleman who stopped me on my way and asked me about the fourth mantra. He was very eager to learn and to practice the fourth mantra. He was very curious, because I had said that the fourth mantra is more difficult. But after that I thought it over, and I thought that the children are able to understand and practice the fourth mantra, also. So today I am going to tell them how to practice the fourth mantra.

You need to practice the fourth mantra when you yourself suffer. Remember, the third mantra is to be practiced when the person you love suffers. You only need to go to him or to her with mindfulness, concentration, and you just proclaim the mantra: “Darling, I know you suffer. That is why I am here for you.” But this fourth mantra is practiced when you yourself suffer. You believe your suffering has been caused by the person you love the most. That is why it is so difficult. When the person you love so much says something or does something that hurts you, you suffer quite a lot. Because if it were another person who said something or did something, you would not suffer that much. But this is the person you love most in the world, and he just did that to you, he just said that to you. That is why you cannot bear it. You suffer one hundred times more. This is when the fourth mantra has to be practiced.

According to this practice, you have to go to that person, that very person, the person you love the most, who just hurt you very deeply. You go to him or to her with full awareness, with full mindfulness and concentration, and you utter the fourth mantra: “Darling, I suffer, please help.” This is quite difficult. But if you train yourself, you can do so. When you suffer and you believe that the person who makes you suffer is the person you love the most, you want to be alone. You want to lock your room, and cry alone. You don't want to see him or her. You don't want to talk to him or to her. You don't want to be touched by him or her. Leave me alone! You don't want him or her to touch you. This is very normal. It's very human also. Even if the other person tries to approach and to reconcile, you are still very angry. You say: “Don't touch me. Leave me alone. I don't want to see you, to be with you.” That's the real feeling at that moment. Very difficult. I think that you have had that experience.

So is it possible to practice the fourth mantra? You go to him or her, and breathing in deeply, out deeply, become yourself one hundred percent and just open your mouth and say with all your might, your concentration, that you suffer and you need her help, his help. It seems that you don't want to do so, because you don't feel that you need his help or her help. You may need the help of all other people, but you don't need his help. You want to be independent. “I don't need you.” That's what you want to say. That is the trouble; because you are deeply hurt. That's why you cannot go to him and to her and ask for help. Your pride is deeply hurt. And that is why the fourth mantra is so important.

In order to be able to practice this, we have to train ourselves for some time. Your natural tendency is to tell him or her that you can survive without him or her. You can be independent. You will not die because you lack his or her love. That is a natural tendency. But

if you know how to look at the situation with wisdom, you see that this is a very, very unwise thing to do. Very stupid thing to do. Because when we love each other, we need each other, especially when we suffer. It would be unwise to do the opposite. You are very sure that your suffering comes from him or her; you are so sure. But maybe you are wrong. She has not done that, she has not said that, in order to hurt you, but you misunderstand. You have a wrong perception. Wrong perception is the word.

I am going to tell you the story of Mr. Truong. It is a true story. It happened in my country many hundreds years ago. The people in my country all know about this story. There was a young man who was drafted into the army, so he had to go to the army and go to war. He had to leave his young wife home alone, pregnant. They cried quite a lot when they had to separate from each other. And they didn't know whether the man would come back alive, because no one knows. To go to war is very risky. You may die in just a few weeks, or in a few months, or you may get badly wounded. Or if you have a lot of luck, you will survive the war and go home to your parents, your wife, your children.

The young man was lucky enough; he survived. A few years later, he was released from the army. His wife was so happy to learn the news that her husband was coming home. She went to the gate of the village to welcome her husband, and she was accompanied by her little boy. The little boy was born while his daddy was in the army. So the moment when they met each other again, they cried and embraced each other and there were tears of joy. They were very grateful that the young man had survived and come home. It was the first ti saw his little boy.

According to tradition, we have to make an offering on the altar of the ancestors, to announce to ancestors that the family is reunified. He told his wife to go to the marketplace and buy flowers, fruits, and other provisions to make an offering to be placed on the altar. He took the little boy home, and he tried to persuade the little boy to call him daddy, but the little boy refused. “Mister, you are not my daddy. My daddy is another person. He used to come to visit us every night, and every time he came my mother would talk to him a lot, for a long time, and my mother used to cry and cry; and when my mother sits down, my daddy also sits down; when my mother lies down, he also lies down; so you are not my daddy.”

The young father was very sad, very hurt. He imagined another man coming to his home every night and spending the night with his wife. All his happiness vanished just like that. Happiness was very short, followed by unhappiness. The young father suffered so much that his heart became a block of stone or ice. He could no longer smile. He became very silent. He suffered very deeply. His wife, shopping, did not know anything about it. So when she came home, she was very surprised. He did not look at her anymore. He did not talk to her anymore. He kept very cold, like he despised her. She did not understand. Why? She began to suffer herself, suffer deeply.

When the offering had been made, she placed it on the altar. Her husband burned the incense, prayed to the ancestors, spread the mat, made the four prostrations and announced that he was home, safe, with his family. You know, in my country, this is a very important practice. In every home, there is an altar for ancestors. On the altar you put the picture of one ancestor that represents all the ancestors. Maybe that is the grandma or the grandpa, and so on. Each morning, someone would come to the altar, wipe away the dust that had gathered on the table, light a stick of incense and bow, and offer that to all the ancestors. This is a very simple, but important practice every morning. So you always have incense sticks in the home.

Every time you come to the altar and light a stick of incense, you touch your ancestors. Touching your ancestors is a very deep practice. I don't know whether our Western friends would like to practice this way, but if they do, they will have the chance to touch their

ancestors every morning. Spiritual ancestors like Jesus, Buddha, the patriarchs, and the teachers. Blood ancestors like grandpa, great grandpa, great grandma, and so on. In Vietnam, this is a very popular practice. Every morning you light a stick of incense. You offer it to your spiritual ancestors and blood ancestors. You breathe in and out, and you touch your ancestors. This is very important, because if you get cut off from your ancestors, you will get sick, like a tree without roots. So I just propose this to you, to see whether it makes sense to set up a family ancestral altar in a European home or in a North American home.

Maybe this practice can help us to get healthier, and bring harmony back into the family. Every time there is something happening in the family, you have to go and announce to your ancestors. This is our practice. It has been there for many thousands of years. If your little girl or little boy gets a strong fever, of course you need to ask a doctor to come and help, but you have to announce this to your ancestors. You have to light a stick of incense, come to the altar, offer it, breathe in and breathe out, and you have to announce to your ancestors that the little girl, the little boy, is has a fever. You have the duty of announcing this to your ancestors because they have the right to know, because that is their great, great granddaughter or son. If you are about to send your son to college, you also have to announce that to your ancestors. They have the right to know. Or if you are about to marry your daughter to someone in the next town, you have to announce that to your ancestors. That is the practice. That is why when the young man came home to be reunified with his family, they had to prepare an offering to be placed on the altar and announce that kind of return to the ancestors.

After having offered incense, prayed and made four prostrations, the young father rolled up the mat and did not allow his wife to do the same, because he thought that his wife was not qualified to present herself in front of the ancestral altar. The young woman felt very ashamed —humiliated—because of that, and she suffered even more deeply. According to the tradition, after the ceremony has ended, they have to bring the offering down, and the family has to sit down and enjoy the meal with joy and happiness; but the young man did not do so. After the offering, he just left the house, went into the village, and spent his time in a liquor shop. The young man got drunk because he could not bear the suffering. In the old times, when they suffered so much, they used to go to the liquor shop and drink a lot of alcohol. Nowadays, people can use many kinds of drugs, but in the olden time alcohol was the only thing. He did not go home until very late, something like one or two o'clock in the morning, and he went home very drunk. He repeated that for many days: never talked to his wife, never looked at her, never ate at home, and the young lady suffered so much she could not bear it. On the fourth day, she jumped into the river and she died. She suffered very much. He also suffered very much. But no one was thinking of coming to the other person and asking for help, because pride—you have to call it by its true name, pride—was an obstacle.

When you suffer, and you believe that your suffering has been caused by the person you love the most, you prefer to suffer alone. Pride prevents you going to the other person and asking for help. What if the husband had come to her? The situation might be very different. That night, he had to stay home because his wife was already dead, to take care of the little boy. He had to search for the kerosene lamp and he had to light it up. When the lamp was lighted up, suddenly the little boy shouted: "Here comes my father!" So he pointed to the shadow of his father on the wall. "You know, mister, my father used to come every night like this and my mother used to talk to him a lot and she cried a lot with him, and every time she sat down, my father also sat down. Every time my mother lay down, he also lay down."

It turns out that his "father" was only the shadow of his mother. In fact, she used to talk to that shadow every night, because she missed her husband so much. One day the little boy had asked her: "Everyone in the village has a father, why don't I have one?" So that night, in order to calm the little boy, she pointed to her shadow on the wall, and said, "Here is your

father!” and she began to talk to the shadow. “My dear husband, you have been away for too long. How could I alone bring up our child? Please come back as soon as possible.” That's the kind of talking she used to do. And of course, when she got tired, she sat down, and the shadow would sit down. Now the young father began to understand. A wrong perception was wiped away. But it was too late; the wife was already dead.

A wrong perception can be the cause of a lot of suffering, and all of us are subjected to our wrong perceptions every day. That is what the Buddha said. We live with wrong perceptions every day. That is what the Buddha said. That is why we have to practice meditation and look deeply into the nature of our perceptions. Whenever we perceive anything, we have to ask the question, “Are you sure your perception is right?” To be safe, you have to ask, “Are you sure of your perceptions?”

When we stand there with friends, and look at the beautiful sunset, we enjoy the beautiful sunset, and we may be sure that the sun is setting, or has not set. But a scientist may tell us that the sun has already set eight minutes ago. The image of the sun we are touching is only the image of the sun eight minutes ago. He is telling the truth. Because it takes eight minutes for the image of the sun to come to us—that is the speed of light. We are very sure that we are seeing the sun in the present moment. That is one of the wrong perceptions. We are subjected to thousands of wrong perceptions like that in our daily life. It may be that the other person did not have the intention to hurt you, yet you believe that she has done that in order to punish you, to make you suffer, to destroy you. You carry with you a wrong perception like that, day and night, and you suffer terribly. Maybe you keep your perception until you die, with a lot of hatred toward a person who may be innocent. That is why meditating on perception is a very important practice.

What if the young man had gone to his wife and asked: “Darling, I have suffered so much in the last few days. I don’t think I can survive. Please help me. Please tell me who is that person who used to come every night, and that you talked cried to a lot, and every time you sat down he would sit down.” A very simple thing to do. Go to her and ask. If he had done so, the young lady would have had a chance to explain, and the tragedy would have ended. They would have recovered their happiness so easily, the direct way. But he did not do so because he was so deeply hurt, and pride has prevented him from going to her and asking for help. He had not learned the fourth mantra.

If the man committed that mistake, the woman also committed the same mistake. She also suffered so deeply, but was too proud to ask. She should have gone to him and asked: “Darling, I don't understand. I suffer very much. I don't understand why you don't look at me, you don't talk to me, you seem to despise me. You seem to feel that I am not there at all. Have I done anything wrong to deserve that kind of treatment?” That's what she had to do. “Darling, I suffer. Please help.” That is the mantra. If she had done so, the young man, the young husband would have answered like this: “Why? Don't you know why? Who is that person who used to come every night, and you talked to him?” Then she would have had the chance to explain.

You know, after the young man found out his mistake, he cried and cried and cried. He pulled his hair. He beat his chest. But it was too late! Finally all the people in the village learned of the tragedy, they came and organized a big ceremony to pray for the poor lady. A ceremony of wiping out injustice committed by people like us, out of our ignorance and wrong perceptions. Together they built a shrine for her. That shrine still stands there. If you visit North Vietnam, going by that river you see that shrine.
We all have to learn from the suffering of the young couple. We should not make the same mistake. Next time, when you suffer, if you believe that your suffering has been caused by the

person you love the most, you have to remember this story. You have to be very careful. You have to learn now to train yourself, to prepare for that time. In that moment, you'll be able to practice the fourth mantra. Practice walking meditation. Practice sitting meditation. Practice breathing in and out mindfully to restore yourself. Then you go to him or to her and you practice the mantra. “Darling, I suffer so much. You are the person I love most in the world. Please help me.” Without pride. If you let your pride stand in between you and her or him, it means that your love is not really true love, because in true love there is no room for pride. If pride is still there, you know that you have to practice in order to transform your love into true love. The children are young, they have plenty of chance to learn and train themselves for the practice. I am confident that even if you are still young, if you get the teaching and if you practice right now, it will be very easy for you to practice later on, when you suffer because you think that the person you love the most has done that to you, has said that to you. I don't think that you are going to use the fourth mantra often, but it is a very important mantra. Maybe you have to use it only once a year, or twice a year, but it is extremely important. So I want you to write it down, and keep it somewhere. And every time you suffer very much, please go and look for that mantra, and try to practice it.

The other day, in the New Hamlet, I was asked by a friend about the meaning of the meditation on the image of Jesus on the cross. What is the meaning of that kind of practice, contemplating the image of Jesus on the cross? At first I thought the question should be addressed to teachers in the tradition. We have often heard that when you contemplate the image of Jesus dying on the cross, you remember the fact that Jesus suffered and died for us. In the Buddhist study and practice concerning suffering, we know that suffering can teach us, we can learn a lot from suffering. If we look deeply into the nature of suffering, we may get insight on how we can get out of our situation. That is why suffering, *dukkha*, has been called in Buddhism a holy truth. Suffering is holy, because the contemplation of suffering can bring about insight on how to get out of suffering and transform it.

If you do not know how to make use of suffering, if you do not know how to learn from the suffering, then suffering cannot be a holy truth. We can sink into the ocean of suffering, we can be overwhelmed by suffering, and suffering is not a holy truth; it is only something destructive. That is why contemplating on suffering is a very important practice in Buddhism. Contemplating suffering, you will know how that suffering has come to be, because everything is born from conditions. And the contemplation on the nature of suffering will bring us insight on how that suffering has come to be, and the conditions that have brought this suffering to us.

Suppose we have a depression. We have to live with that depression right now. We may ask whether we are able to get out of that depression, make it go away, and the Buddha said yes. If you look deeply into the nature of your depression, you would know how it has come to you. You will look back and see how you have lived your life in the last six months or so, you will find out how that depression has come. When you have insight, you just decide not to feed your depression in the way you have done during the last six months. Then your depression will have to die or go away for lack of food, because everything needs food to survive, including your depression.

If I were to contemplate the suffering that Jesus underwent on the cross, I would ask whether Jesus bears his suffering, the injustice that was forced on him, well. In this summer opening we have had a few Dharma talks on the topic of forbearance. We have learned that if our heart is big, and if we have a lot of peace and joy and love then it would not be difficult at all for us to bear some injustice that people inflict on us. But if we are full of pain, suffering, anger, hatred, then it will be very difficult for us to accept the injustice people inflict on us. So I would find out whether Jesus bears the injustice that was inflicted on him well, whether in his

heart there was anger or hatred, whether he is trying to teach us how to learn from our suffering. The image of Jesus dying on the cross may be very instructive, very helpful to us.

But I also got a new insight. It was during a visit to Monbos that I made with a few young monks and nuns. We went into the church in Monbos, not very far from here, and we sat there for half an hour. During the time I sat there I contemplated Jesus on the cross, and I had the vision that Jesus should be presented in other forms, not only on the cross. We learned that Jesus had gone to the mountain and practiced meditation alone. During that time he spent on the mountain he may have been practicing walking meditation or sitting meditation. Our friends have to depict him in a sitting position or in walking meditation, radiating peace and stability. An artist within the church has to come forward and bring us these images of Jesus that convey stability, solidity, calm, peace, tolerance. That's what we need. That's what the young people in the church need.

Young people are looking for something like stability, like tolerance, like understanding, like love. Maybe they don't need to contemplate a lot the image of Jesus dying on the cross, but they need a very refreshing image of Jesus Christ, doing walking meditation or sitting meditation or holding children and playing with children. I really think so. Now people are attracted to the image of the Buddha, because the Buddha was sitting in a very solid, calm way, radiating peace and happiness, a half-smile on his lips. That is what we are very hungry for. We are very hungry for stability, for peace, for solidity, for tranquility. Anyone living in our time will feel that. That's what we need the most. And therefore the young people, when they go to church, they should be able to touch these elements embodied by the clergy and by the images, especially the image of Jesus Christ.

Jesus was young when he died, but not many people have tried to present him as having joy, vitality, peace. Jesus had a great vitality within himself. It was very active during the years of his teaching. He encountered many, many people. He helped so many people. And you know that when you are able to do something for people you get a lot of joy, of peace, of stability. That is why I try to speak for the young people. We need the image of Jesus smiling, sitting, walking, embodying the joy, the peace, the tranquility, the love. The young people need that image very much.

Also, during that question and answer session, there was one question about the necessity of expressing our emotions and anger. The friend who asked me that question began by saying that if he tries to be calm, his child continues to be nervous, but if he begins to shout then his child gets quiet and calm. I did not have the chance to address his question, this approach. I only told him “Well, you shout, and then your little boy gets calm and doesn’t disturb you anymore, and you believe that it works. But if you look deeply into it, maybe it would not work in the future. Because by shouting like that, your child may get an internal formation, a wound within himself. And later on maybe communication between you and him will become difficult.” So we cannot say that it works. It may work for one moment, but it may cause damage in the future.

I said that “when you shout, your shouting may come from love or might come from irritation. There is a difference.” When you shout with irritation in you, that will create some negative things in you and also in your child. You have to measure the consequence of that. You cannot say that because you shout like that he accepts to become calm for a moment and you think it's a good way to proceed. There are many cases where a son or daughter cannot communicate to a father. Communication is just impossible, because maybe the father has been using his authority a little bit too much. The father has to learn how to deal with the little boy or the little girl as a friend. He needs to practice forbearance, patience. He needs to practice loving-kindness even with his little boy or little girl. He needs to learn how to

manage his irritation, his anger. A lot of tragedy has resulted from the way fathers and mothers deal with their children.

When there is a fight between parents and children, the losers are very often the children, because the children don't have the right to respond to their parents the way their parents do. They cannot use the same kind of language or reaction, because they are at the mercy of their parents—financially and in every aspect they have to depend on their parents. That is why, when their parents express their anger, the children have to receive the violence and they have no means to get it out—to express it, to transform it. If the parents don't know how to transform their violence, then the children will not know how to transform theirs either, because they have not learned anything from their parents. When children have become victims of the violence brought on them by parents, they suffer, and they don't know what to do. That violence within them becomes a poison that continues to kill them. If these young people try to kill themselves, it’s mostly because they want to retaliate against their parents. By killing themselves, they want to send a message to their parents: “You know, I am killing myself because of you. You have made me suffer so much, and this is the fruit of your behavior, your way of dealing with me.” So when a young man or young woman commits suicide, there is always that kind of message directed to parents or society or someone else, because the violence in him or her has no way to be transformed.

[Bell]

Most of us who sit here, we are at the same time children and parents. Even if we are still young, we can be already a big sister or a big brother, and already have to play the role of a parent. That is why we have to learn how to be children and to be parents at the same time. We have to learn how to manage, how to take care of the violence in us. The energy of violence, the energy of hatred and anger in us, is something that continues to destroy us, to shape our behavior. That is why we have to learn the practice of how to handle that negative energy and how to transform it. In the Buddhist teachings, it is clear that the practice of compassion and loving-kindness is the only antidote to violence, hatred, and anger. We have learned that compassion and loving-kindness cannot just be born like that, they need the practice in order to be born. That is the kind of energy that should be fabricated by us.

The practice of generating that kind of energy that can transform violence and hatred in us is the practice of looking deeply. Only the practice of looking deeply can bring about acceptance and understanding and love. When you practice breathing in on your cushion and visualize that you are a five-year-old boy or a five-year-old girl, and invite that little boy or little girl to be with you, you might touch that little boy or little girl in you with compassion, because that little boy or girl did suffer during your time of childhood. Your father at some point may have shouted at you, believing that shouting was the best way to keep you calm. He did not know that shouting like that could open up a wound within your little heart. The heart of little boy, five years old, is very tender, very vulnerable. Parents should be aware of these things. When you look at your little boy with a stern look, that is enough to scare him, to create terror in him, and to create a wound within his tender heart. For you, it's very normal that a father when irritated can shout and can look at his boy with such kind of eyes, but for a little boy of five years old, that may be too much. For a little girl five years old that may be too much.

So breathing in, I see myself as a five-year-old girl or five-year-old boy. And during the whole time of your in-breath, you allow that little boy or little girl to come back. He is still alive in you. I am sure. I know. The little girl, the little boy, is still alive very much, with very much the same kind of need and suffering. When he is there, she is there, you have to embrace him or her in your mindfulness. You have to say: “Darling, I know you are still there, and I am here for you.” The first mantra, the second mantra. Breathing out, I smile to

that little boy who was me. That smile is already the smile of compassion. Because when you breathe in, you see yourself as a five-year-old boy or girl, very vulnerable, very fragile. That is why when you breath out, your heart is already filled with compassion, and you embrace that little boy or little girl with your energy of compassion. There is already understanding.

Mindfulness of breathing revives an image, helps you to look deeply into that image, and helps you to generate the energy of compassion with which you embrace him or her. That is very healing, and you may continue this for some time, maybe ten, fifteen minutes.

I have in my hut a picture of me taken when I was sixteen and a half, a young novice. Every time I look at that, I still feel a lot of compassion. He did not know his path yet. He didn't know what difficulties were waiting for him, because I underwent a lot of difficulties, sufferings. So if you want to practice, you may like to use your family album, you may need a picture of you when you were five or four, and you generate compassion for yourself.

There was a young man who came to the Upper Hamlet, I think about eight or ten years ago, who was given that kind of practice because he hated his father. He could not bear the thought of thinking and writing a letter to his father. At that time all the monks and nuns and lay people received the assignment of writing a letter, a love letter, to his or her father or mother. For him, to write a letter to his mommy might be possible, but not to his daddy. Although his daddy already had passed away, he still could not reconcile with him. He just could not think of his father. He considered his father as the main source of his suffering. There are many men and women like that around us.

During the week that followed, I gave him the other half of the exercise: “Breathing in, I see my father as a five-year-old boy. Breathing out, I smile to that five-year-old boy that my father was.” Maybe you have not had a chance to see your father as a little boy, but before he became an adult, he was a little boy. Very fragile. Very vulnerable, also. Suddenly, that fragile image of your father comes to you, and you see that he's no different from you. He was also as vulnerable as you, as fragile as you. He may be a victim of your grandpa. Every time his father shouted at him, every time his father looked at him with a stern look, he got a wound in his heart, just like you. He did not know how to transform that, so he was repeating the same kind of thing with you.

That's what we call the wheel of *samsara*, the vicious circle transmitted from father to son, from son to grandson. The violence we received, we don't know how to transform, and even if we hate our father, if we promised ourselves that when we grow up we will do entirely differently from our father, we will repeat the same. We will do exactly the way our father has done to us. That is the wheel of samsara.

I have seen many young men who are very determined that they will do the opposite of their father. But when they grow up, get married, and have children, they do exactly the same. The whole habit energy, the transmission, the samsara. So if you are touched by the Dharma, you have an instrument to cut through the wheel of samsara, you end the samsara, and you will not transmit that violence to the next generation.

“Breathing in, I see my father as a five-year-old boy. Breathing out, I smile to my father as a five-year-old boy.” Vulnerable. Fragile. Fearful. That is the practice of looking deeply, because when you look like that, you see that the other person suffers like you, is also a victim like you. Suddenly the nectar of compassion is born in your heart. Suddenly you feel that you can breathe in and out again. The image of your father is no longer the same. He is now a little boy with a lot of suffering, a lot of fear, a lot of wounds within himself. You have

suffered, that is why you can understand the suffering of someone else, and that someone else is your father.

Fathers always have the tendency to love and make their children happy. That tendency is deep, it is natural. But because they have not learned the way to love properly, the way to handle their violence and anger, they have not been able to express their true love, and they have inflicted a lot of suffering on their children. We cannot say that there is no love in them, we can only say that the love in them has no way to be expressed. If we can begin to understand this, our heart will begin to open, and suddenly we can breathe and we can survive, because a drop of the nectar of compassion is already born in our heart. We no longer want to blame, because we have touched his or her suffering. We know that he does not need punishment, he needs help.

During his lifetime, no one has been able to help him, to transform his violence and his anger. He has not had a teacher, a Dharma brother or sister; and if I had not had a teacher, a brother or sister in the Dharma, I would have done like him, you see. So no blaming is possible now. Only compassion is the answer. So suddenly, you are on your cushion, and you feel that you can breathe, you can survive. And you can continue to practice. “Breathing in, I see my father as a suffering child. Breathing out, I embrace my father with my compassionate smile.” This is very healing, very nourishing.

The young man placed on his table a picture of his father. He had asked for a picture of his father to be sent from America. He placed that on his desk. Every time he went out of his room he stopped by the door, looked into his father’s eyes, and began to breathe in and out and visualize his father as a little boy. Every time he went into his room, he turned on the light on the table, looked at that picture, and practiced breathing in and out. A few weeks later, he was able to sit down and write a letter, the assignment. We call it a love letter, the first love letter. And he succeeded in writing the letter. Writing a letter like that untied a lot of bondage in him, because of the nectar of compassion that had been born in his heart. Your heart suddenly expands, there is now a lot of space, and now you can bear the injustice quite easily because you have an amount of understanding, of compassion that can digest, that can transform.

So the practice of looking deeply is the practice of expanding the heart, of putting more space and compassion into our heart. Bodhisattvas who have to bear a lot of injustice don't have any hatred or anger in their heart. That is why they accept, they digest, injustice and suffering very quickly. In the Christian gospel you read: “Father, forgive them because they don't know what they are doing.” They are doing that out of their ignorance. That is also good meditation, a good practice of looking deeply.

When the little boy held the two wings of the butterfly in two hands and tore the butterfly apart, he didn't know what he was doing to the butterfly. He needs someone to tell him and to help him. I told him: “My dear, don't you know that tonight the father and the mother of the butterfly will have to spend the whole night waiting for the butterfly to come home? Don't you think that your parents would worry if you didn't come home tonight? Please be kind to the butterfly.” The child understood right away. The next day when it was raining hard and a lot of snails were coming out on the path, he was picking up these snails with me and putting them back in the bush, saying we had to be careful, otherwise the snails could not go back to their parents that night.

So people are doing you injustice, are doing awful things to you and the people around. They may think that doing that is good. They don't know what they are doing. They do it out of ignorance. And hatred, anger, jealousy, all these things are born from ignorance. That is what

the Buddha said. So practicing looking deeply is to bring the kind of insight that will help us to understand, to accept, to love, to be compassionate.

[Bell]

When we have the energy of compassion in us, we can relate to the world very easily, because it is exactly that kind of energy that helps us to get out of our prison of loneliness. The people who have no compassion within their heart, they are very alone, because they have no ways to relate to other living beings. Having the energy of compassion in you, you are already a happy person. Every time you can do something to help another living being, the joy always returns to you. The teaching of love in Buddhism is quite clear. And also very deep.

Our love is there for the other person or persons. But according to this teaching, you have to practice looking deeply into the nature of your love. And you can always improve the nature of your love. There are kinds of love that bring us a lot of sorrow, a lot of jealousy, a lot of hatred, a lot of suffering, because they are not true love. True love within the Buddhist teachings has to contain the element of loving-kindness. *Maitri* is loving-kindness and loving-kindness is the capacity of offering happiness. This is the process of learning, because to make the other person happy, you need to be there. You need to learn how to look at him or her. You need to learn how to talk to him or to her. Making another person happy is an art that we have to learn. It's not because we bring him or her a lot of money that we can make him or her happy, but the way we live, the freshness we have, the tolerance we have. You are just there by his side or her side, and the other person enjoys your presence, enjoys your company, because your person contains loving-kindness, radiates loving-kindness. And whatever you do can bring him or her a lot of happiness. The word you say, a look you direct to that person, is enough to make him or her very happy.

According to the practice, you have to understand the real needs of that person, and again you have to practice looking deeply. If you do not know what the other person really needs, you will not be able to offer him or her happiness. And if you don't have time, how can you look deeply into the other person? So take time, practice looking deeply into him or her, and see what kind of needs she has or he has, and just bring him or bring her the things they need. Maybe what they need is not a lot: your attention, your capacity of listening to him or to her, your capacity of talking to her in a nice way. Well, these things are very important, and maybe they just need these things to be really happy. You know that you can train yourself in order to be able to offer these kind of joys and happiness.

The second element of true love is compassion, *karuna*. That is the capacity of removing the pain, transforming the pain in the person you love. Again, you have to practice looking deeply to see what kind of suffering that person has in him or her. Again, you see that you need to be really there in order to see. Your presence is necessary. Then, if you are mindful, you will know that the person you love suffers, and with some amount of looking deeply, you can identify the suffering in him or her. If you can look a little bit more deeply, you see the nature and the cause of that suffering. Only then can you practice compassion, karuna. If you don't show that you understand that suffering, then you cannot practice karuna. You have to really understand that suffering, and sometimes you can stop the suffering just by the way you behave, talk, and act.

Maybe you are the cause of that suffering. You have no capacity to listen deeply to that person. You have no capacity of talking to him or her in a calm and loving way; therefore, you cannot understand his or her suffering. Now, if you are able to train yourself and to practice loving speech and compassionate listening, you might by yourself transform the suffering in her or in him. That is true in most cases. That person might confront easily the

other difficulties in life if she is supported by you, she is understood by you, she feels that you are on her side. That is compassion and compassion is the fruit of meditation, looking deeply.

The third element of true love is joy, *mudita*. There are those who love each other, but who cry every day, who make each other cry every day. It means that their love is not true love yet, because the element of joy is not there. True love must bring you joy and happiness, and not sorrow every day. If your love is possessive love, you may behave like a tyrant, a dictator, so you make the person you love suffer every day, you make each other suffer every day, because of your narrow ideas of happiness, your wrong perceptions. That is why your love is not true love yet. The practice of looking deeply will help you to be less possessive, more understanding, and therefore you can offer the other person joy every day. I have seen true love. I have seen people loving each other and offering each other joy every day, maybe every hour, every minute. It is not difficult. It is not difficult. With some mindfulness, with concentration, with some training, you can do that.

The fourth and last element of true love is freedom, equanimity. If by loving, by being in love, you feel that you are losing your freedom, you have no space to move anymore, that's not true love. That is why in true love you have to offer yourself and the other person space and freedom. You know that when you arrange flowers, you should allow each flower to have some space around it in order for the flower to radiate its beauty. A person is also a flower. If he is deprived of freedom, and then he will not feel happy; therefore love in such a way that you can retain your freedom and that person also can retain her or his freedom. And this is possible.

There is a poem that I like about the moon. The refreshing moon, beautiful moon, is sailing through the ocean of the sky. The Buddha is the full moon that goes across the immense sky. If the river is calm, then the image of the moon will be reflected clearly in the river. Something like that. The image I like is the full moon traveling in the sky. You feel the freedom of the moon, because the moon has a lot of space around her. And the moon can benefit many people, can bring a lot of happiness to many people. It shines on everyone. It does not discriminate. It shines on the mountain and on the rivers. On this side of the frontier, on the other side of the frontier. That is equanimity. No discrimination. True love is *upeksa*, non-discrimination, and therefore no dictatorship.

All in one, One in All.

Dharma Talk given by Thich Nhat Hanh on August 11, 1997 in Plum Village, France.

Good morning, my dear friends, today is the 11th of August 1997, and we are in the upper hamlet of Plum Village. I guess that everyone here has seen the lotus pond in the lower hamlet. Yesterday I conducted a walking meditation to the lotus pond, and then we went to the plum trees. It was very nice. We enjoyed the lotus and we also enjoyed the plum trees. Many of you were not there. But it looked like Paradise, it was Paradise, and it still is available. Later, you will realize that the lotus pond is not only in the lower hamlet, but in your heart. When you go home to your town and to your house, and every time you sit down quietly and you focus your attention on the lotus pond and the lotus pond will be born again from within you.

Our mind has all kinds of seeds in it. You have a seed of the lotus pond within you. Every time you use your mindfulness and you touch the seed of the lotus pond in you, you can see the lotus pond with all these flowers and big leaves like this. You don't have to go to the lower hamlet to really have the lotus pond. You may ask the question "Where has the lotus pond come from?" I will tell you.

Today I have my pebble bag, but instead of having six pebbles, I have something else in it. My bag is full of lotus seeds. And all the lotuses in the lower hamlet came from a tiny seed like this. We just begin with one seed. Can you look into this seed and see the whole lotus pond and hundreds of lotus flowers and lotus leaves? Can you imagine that all the lotuses and all the leaves of the lotuses come from this tiny little seed? Yet this is true. I'll tell you how to make this lotus seed into a lotus pond. It's easy. Please listen, because I'm going to offer each of you one lotus seed, so that when you go home, you'll be able to make a lotus pond.

You know that a lotus seed has to be planted in mud with water because it does not grow well in dry soil. You think that this seed can be just put into the mud and you can wait until it sprouts, but it will not sprout if you just put it in the mud, because the lotus seed is made of a kernel inside and also a very hard skin outside. Even if you leave the lotus seed three weeks or five weeks or ten weeks within the mud, it will not sprout, even if the mud is full of water. I know that there are lotuses that remain alive for more than one thousand years, and after one thousand years we plant it, it can still grow into a lotus plant.

So you should know how to help the lotus seed to sprout. This is the secret: you have to help the water to penetrate into the lotus seed. You may use a little knife, a little saw, and you cut just a little bit, about half a millimeter, so that the water has a chance to penetrate into the lotus and about four or five days later, the lotus seed will sprout and become a tiny lotus plant. If you hold a lotus seed like this and you rap it against a rock for one minute, this part of the skin of the lotus will be removed, so that that spot of the lotus skin will allow the water to get in, and five days after, it will sprout. You will see very tiny lotus leaves and the lotus leaves can get as big as this cup. You keep it in your yard if it is in the spring or summer or autumn, but when it is cold, you bring it into your house. It will continue to grow, and when spring comes you can bring it out, and you can change the container into a bigger one, and the lotus plant will become bigger and bigger. In one year you will begin to have a few lotus flowers, and in three years you will have a lotus pond as big as the one in the lower hamlet, and if you want it can be ten times bigger. Do you think that you can do it? You can make a lotus pond as big as this.